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ABSTRACT

Major themes from an ongoing study of women in midlife were identified using data from interviews with 60 women 35 to 55 who vary in family status: never-married, married/childless, married with children and work status (working in high, medium, or low-prestige occupations or at home). Interviews focused on issues, rewards, and concerns. There were variations rather than commonalities in the developmental tasks women faced in midlife. The most frequent theme was the desire to devote increased attention to the self in contrast to the devotion to others characteristic of earlier years. Most women vaguely assumed that a love attachment to a man, rather than to a career or mentor, would shape their adult life. Exceptions to this pattern were those women whose mothers had been the major economic provider. Many women regretted their failure to develop an identity as worker in the adult world. The image of midlife and retrospective reports of earlier stages of adult development are contrasted with Levinson's work on men. (Author)

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IF THE STUDY OF MIDLIFE HAD BEGUN WITH WOMEN

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The title of this paper, "If the Study of Midlife Had Begun With Women," is meant to provoke thinking about issues of generalizability, as is discussed below, rather than to imply that the study of midlife should have begun with women. We agree with Leonard Pearlin and others (Pearlin, 1980; Pearlin & Radabaugh, in press) that the proper study of midlife should, ideally, include both men and women, as well as subjects representing a broad age range. In this way one can tell whether what one observes in those of middle age is in fact more characteristic of midlife than of other ages.

The study we report here, however, was of women 35 to 55, a focus determined in part by limited resources and in part because it was first conceptualized at the time Daniel Levinson's (1974, 1975) work on midlife men was becoming known. We were skeptical about whether chronological age was a core variable in organizing and understanding the events of the middle years for women, as Levinson perceived it to be for men. We thought it likely that such major variations in the lives of women of similar ages as whether or not they were married, had paid jobs, or had children would result in profound variations in how they experienced their lives in general and their middle years in particular.

The study was conducted in two phases; data presented here are from the first phase. The focus of the study was on the issues, concerns, and

gratifications women report, and on how these are related to: (a) their work status, age, and family status, and (b) their sense of well-being. For both phases, the samples, as described in Figure 1, were composed of women who occupy jointly one of three family statuses (never married; married

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See Figure 1.

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without children; married with children) and one of six work statuses: (paid work in high-, middle-, or low-prestige occupations, or unpaid work at home, divided by whether the husband's occupation is high-, middle-, or low-prestige). These groups were chosen for their theoretical interest; for example, they vary in number and nature of roles. Moreover, many of the life patterns represented are of increasing social importance, e.g., women in high-prestige occupations; childless married women, yet in probability samples they are rarely represented in sufficient numbers for detailed analysis. (Never-married nonemployed women were omitted; they are an extremely atypical group that includes many disabled women.)

The first stage of the study consisted of intensive semi-structured interviews with approximately four women from each of the cells shown in Figure 1. The women were located through snowball techniques. In the second stage, a disproportionate random sample of 15 women per cell was drawn from a town in the greater Boston area. The random sample was interviewed using a structured survey instrument, developed through refining of questions in the first stage. Knowing that rigorous tests of our hypotheses using a random sample are just being completed, we can

permit ourselves the luxury of being speculative with our first-stage data.

Women in both parts of the study were asked about gratifications and concerns in their lives as a whole and in specific domains, e.g., paid work or homemaking; marriage or being single; being a parent or being childless; relationships with parents and siblings. We also asked about positive and negative aspects of combining roles, about attitudes toward growing older, about reactions to the women's movement, and several other areas. Women's self-perceptions—how they saw themselves in the past, present, and future—were of special interest and were examined intensively in an open-ended way in the first phase, in which we invited women to collaborate with us in the task of understanding their lives.

The findings reported here concern the domain of the self: (a) retrospective reports about the women's late adolescence and (b) current attitudes toward the self. To begin with the adolescent years, we started by asking a general question about how, when they were in their mid to late teens, the women had envisioned their future selves, their lives as adults. It became apparent after the first few interviews, as will be seen, that we needed to ask specifically about expectations concerning work, and about how the women expected their future economic needs to be met. Responses to these questions revealed modes of thinking about this area of life—that is, one's economic future—that have been maladaptive and dysfunctional for women—developmental disabilities, if you will, that come back to haunt them in

the middle or later years and leave them at high risk for poverty, diminished well-being, and even psychiatric symptomatology.

Exemplifying the way the majority of women thought about their future is a quotation from a married woman with children, now in her mid-forties, who teaches and practices physical therapy.

> I thought Prince Charming would come and take care of me for the rest of my life...I thought, as I'm sure every little girl has, that when I grew up I'd be married and wouldn't work...even in professional school I thought it was a sort of temporary thing and I didn't value the profession.

A married childless woman in her 40's, who does secretarial work in an upholstery shop, recalled that she had "very few" ideas about her economic future:

> I must have been semi-conscious as a youngster. I hoped I would be richer ... that's not a goal, I just thought it would happen ... I would marry a rich man, which I didn't ... I don't know how all this was going to happen. I certainly knew my folks weren't going to leave it to me, they were not rich. I just thought it would happen, I suppose, that I would be rich ....I don't know what I thought, how my life would turn out. I don't think I thought much about it.

And a never-married woman about 50, now struggling to support herself as a bookkeeper said when asked how she had thought her financial needs would be taken care of:

> It's awful, but I just thought they would be. I didn't sort of think I was going to have to do it...I think that's why my thinking was kind of unrealistic in the sense that I didn't really realize that the work was out there for me to have to conquer or do...I just sort of grew up and got here by day-to-day living. There was no planning, nothing, so it just sort of went on.

The only women who differed from this general pattern of having given

little thought to their occupational and economic futures were those whose mothers had been the primary economic providers for the family when they were growing up, in most cases because the fathers were absent. Although some of these women still reported having had fantasies about Prince Charming, another part of themselves understood and prepared for the reality they had witnessed.

We were alerted in an early interview to the negative consequences of limiting one's dreams to those of love and marriage. A writer in her forties, who had never married, had lived for many years on the meager and irregular earnings her writing brought her. Not long before our interview, her apartment building had been turned into a condominium, and she discovered that she could not afford to buy her apartment to which she was very attached. This unexpected event was a severe blow that precipitated a crisis in her thinking about her way of life and her future. Eventually she mobilized herself to enroll in a management course and took on administrative responsibilities within an organization of writers, thus obtaining a higher, more stable income.

In the course of working through this crisis, she found herself, for the first time, conversing with her father about the kinds of financial and career issues that have traditionally been discussed between <u>son</u> and father. She reflected on how different her experiences as a young woman were from the experiences he recounted as a young man beginning his career with his first employer:

> In his job they gave him a chance to find out what he was good at and made him think about his future...If someone had talked to me that way, I would have said, "I don't want to hear about it", [because] if anyone had said to me I wouldn't be married two or three years out of college, I would have laughed. It never occurred to me.

> Father, on the other hand, was like a healthy plant that got stuck down in a good soil, and someone was standing over him, watering and weeding. And he was ready...his ears and mind were open.

She saw that for many men during late adolescence and early adulthood, inner readiness and external encouragement combine in a way that has been experienced by few women in our society. For girls, the focus during late adolescence was on dreams of love and marriage. There was a striking absence of any clear picture of an autonomous self-functioning in the adult world of work. This one-dimensional view of the future is strongly linked, we believe, to a major theme that emerged as currently salient across all the groups of women, with the interesting exception of those in high-prestige occupations (an exception discussed below). The theme was that of a newly experienced sense of the value and worth of the self, and of the importance of attending to one's needs. It emerged not only when we raised the topic of how the woman saw herself but also came up spontaneously, often when women were talking about how they felt about growing older and about the future. As many put it, since I now feel so much better about myself than I used to, why should I dread the future?

One married woman with children, age 46, employed as a clerk, said when asked how she felt about the future and about growing older: "I never felt attractive, never felt sure of myself as much as I do now." In a frequent variation on this theme, a 54-year-old wife and mother employed as a receptionist said, "I just began a few years ago to think, what about me, when am I ever going to do anything for myself." And a 36-year-old non-employed married woman with four children, when asked about how she saw herself, said:

> I have a better picture of myself now than I did before. I'm happier with who I am. Maturity is just beginning to have any meaning inside me. It's surprising I could live this long and not know myself or never really take that much interest.

The phrase "taking an interest" was used by several women: a non-employed married woman with children, age 52, said: "It took a lot of years, until I was 48 or so, for me to become interested in myself as a person. The dictionary tells us that "interest" means attention, curiosity, and concern--and having the power of exciting these attitudes. Perhaps a new sense of power in the self is implied by this phrase.

The theme of increased self esteem was distributed across all the whole age range studied. Moreover, it was in no way limited to women who had raised children; thus it cannot be explained by children's increasing independence and the need for a new focus as the nest empties. Nor was this theme limited to women who were married. And women who were employed and those who were not were equally likely to express it. A never-married women in her forties, an artist, noted: "Just this summer I began to value what I had done more...I'm no disaster scene." A married childless woman, age 36, not employed said: "I like myself better at 36 than I did at 26." And another married childless woman, age 41, now back at school as well as employed, said:

> Before, my goal was in helping [other people] attain their goals--my mother keeping her home, my sister graduating from college, my husband getting our home, boat, and car. This in fact was my goal, just that they attained theirs. I guess I've come to the realization that you get pretty short-changed when this is the way you perceive yourself. Then when it comes time for the supported person to be supportive, you don't get any [support].

It is the self as a whole that is seen as having been unattended to and undervalued, rather than specific parts of oneself or one's life. As we sat in the kitchen of a church basement interviewing a 52-year-old nun in a teaching order, the telephone rang loudly in her nearby office. She commented:

> Two years ago it would have been unheard of for me to sit here and let the phone ring. I had to convince myself that I have rights and I have my own needs.... It was very difficult for me to come to that point, because with me it was a constant giving, giving, giving. I never saw myself as a priority on a list of priorities.

And she said about our conversation:

> If I had been asked these questions ten years ago, the answers would have been different. I had a very poor image of myself. I saw myself as definitely servant and subservient.

Why did this theme emerge so strongly for so many of the women, regardless of their age or their particular family or work situation? Perhaps it is related to the common socialization history almost all women share —that of putting others first. Such attitudes die hard, of course, and one can hear the echoes of guilt, uncertainty, and struggle, of protesting too much, in many of the quotations. But these women also share a particular current social climate, summed up most quickly by the phrase "the women's movement", and it is our working hypothesis that this social context may be the sine qua non, the necessary if not sufficient cause for the positive changes they report. As Leonard Pearlin has stated, we must consider social and economic forces in combination with life cycle events and personality factors in order to explain how people develop.

What is intriguing is that our belief that changes in the situation of women have had an important impact gets little support from the women themselves. When we asked subjects how the women's movement had affected them, only rarely did answers refer to more positive self-images. Although the majority of women reported some positive effects of the women's movement, most typically they talked about their increased ability to understand the differing values of their children and of the "younger" generation—particularly living together before marriage, divorce, abortion, etc. Many women said that the movement had not affected them because they had always thought women could and should do anything they wanted. A substantial minority of women were negative, most often because they saw women acting too much like men.

An extreme example of the failure to make connections between social change and personal change is the nun, described earlier, who talked with delight about recent changes in her order: being allowed to go home or away on weekends; discarding the habit; more egalitarian relationships with priests. But she never linked these to her own new feelings about herself.

To what did the women attribute the change within themselves? Most often they cited chronological age: "It's turning thirty-five." "It's being fifty," or "It's getting to my forties." We pressed further for explanations and heard many reasonable ones:

The married childless woman working in an upholstery shop, who was quoted earlier, attributed her new sense of well-being to getting to her forties:

> I discussed it with my brother, and we agreed that by the time you get to that age, you know, and hopefully become reconciled to the fact that you are not going to discover

> penicillin, you're not going to write the world's greatest novel, you're not going to—I'm not going to say be President of the United States, because who the hell ever wants to be, but you come to terms with what you are and hopefully like yourself.

And the nun, in her fifties, attributed the changes within her to a sense of accomplishment in her work:

> It has to do with the security of knowing you have accomplished quite a bit in your area and can give yourself some leeway or some sort of respite.

Yet similar feelings were reported by women who did not appear to have the sense of accomplishment in work that she reports. Indeed, the professional women, who did take pride in their accomplishments, were least likely to report a new sense of self-worth. Self-esteem, apparently, was not new for them. One such woman, a never-married professor now in her fifties, responded when asked about how she saw herself: "One is never satisfied with what one has done, but on the whole I guess I'll give myself a B plus." The interviewer then asked what kinds of things she was taking into account in her assessment:

> I'm a great teacher and that gives me pleasure. I think I've been a good sister and a great aunt. I think I've respected my parents.... I think my book is a real contribution to the field.

Her tone suggested a matter-of-fact, long-standing sense of self-worth that may be characteristic of women in prestigious occupations.

Our conclusion at this point in our data analysis is that just as women have previously tended to blame themselves, their individual failings, for feelings of dissatisfaction and depression, they are now attributing more positive feelings solely to personal, internal factors, ignoring social, political, and economic causes. If so, one implication is that we cannot depend upon subjects to point out the impact of social conditions; we need

to be alert to these. Consideration of the famous "period" effect requires more than lip service, both in our own research and in thinking about the results of others. Social conditions peculiar to a particular era may contribute, for example, to the midlife reexamination and reevaluation of the life structure reported by Levinson's male subjects, as well as to the struggle for autonomy and identity noted by Lillian Rubin (1979) in her study of adult women.

The interaction of social conditions with age or cohort is also relevant. To the extent that girls are socialized differently and no longer take as their central mission devotion to the needs of others at the expense of the self, they will, of course, be less likely to report the discovery of self-worth as a major event in their middle years.

Finally, we wish to point out that if the study of midlife had in fact begun with women, findings such as we have reported here--adolescent dreams limited to love and marriage, a midlife discovery of self-worth--would probably not be assumed to apply to men. When research is based on female subjects, the limits of generalizability are somehow clear to everyone.

WORK STATUS	FAMILY STATUS: Never Married	Married without Children	Married with Children
Working High-Prestige			
Working Medium-Prestige			
Working Low-Prestige			
At Home: Husband High-Prestige	X		
At Home: Husband Medium-Prestige	X		
At Home: Husband Low-Prestige	X		

Note. For each cell, N = 15

FIGURE 1: SUBJECT GROUPS

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